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Review

# The Birth of New Languages in Contemporary Europe

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## ABSTRACT

*The birth of a language is a historical process, which develops through almost six stages corresponding to six main properties (genetic distance, geographical isolation, adoption of a writing system, elaboration of a literary koine, national consciousness, official status), which are specific to Western civilization and limited to our concern, i.e. the languages in contemporary Europe. The two last properties are the most important and conclusive in achieving the full status of language in contrast with dialect, speech, idiom, vernacular and so on. Consequently, in this perspective the birth of a language can be stated when its use is felt as a token of national identity and its official status is recognized by politic power. The history of some interesting cases during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Luxemburgish, Feroese and Macedonian will throw a light on the possible future scenario of the languages of the Former Yugoslavia. Other disputed, although not so dramatic cases, like Sardinian, Aranese, Moldavian and Ruthenian, are dealt with together with recurrent topics on minority languages. The conclusion is that, unlike the worldwide tendency, the number of languages will probably increase within the greater European Union in the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**Key words:** language birth, official status, standard variety, national identity

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## Defining Language Birth in Western Perspective

Every time I read a report on the state of the languages of the world I get the impression of reading the page of obituaries in the newspaper. In the library of my Department and in particular in the section devoted to sociolinguistics I can find a fair number of books concerning language

death, but none concerning language birth. First of all it is necessary to define what we mean with the term »language birth« and to restrict our concern to the European domain.

The birth of a language is a historical process, which schematically develops

through six stages corresponding to six main properties, namely:

- 1) genetic distance, that is differentiation in phonology, grammar and lexicon;
- 2) geographical isolation, that is areal segregation through definite boundaries;
- 3) adoption of a writing system and, consequently, transmission of the language through written records;
- 4) elaboration of a literary koine, that is a common stable variety shared by all the speakers;
- 5) national consciousness, that is the feeling that a language is a symbol of identity;
- 6) official status, that is political recognition.

It goes without saying that these properties are specific to Europe and, more generally, to what is called »Western civilization«. It is worth noticing that in this process the importance of properties (1) and (2), which are fundamental in linguistic classification, is almost negligible and often incidental. On the contrary properties (5) and (6) are the necessary and conclusive prerequisites in achieving the full status of language as opposed to dialect, vernacular, idiom and so on<sup>1</sup>.

Our preliminary conclusion is that the birth of a language can be considered definitive when its use is felt as a token of

national or ethnic identity and its official status is recognized by political power.

### Some Typical Cases from European History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In this perspective last century has delivered us some new-born languages, whose history lies under our eyesight (Table 1).

Let us take into account the case of Macedonian. In 1918, when the Great Powers reshaped the borders in the Balkan Peninsula, the Slavic Macedonia was assigned to the new state that in 1930 took the name of Yugoslavia in order to limit Russian influence, despite the claims of Macedonians, who hoped to obtain a full national independency. At that time Macedonian was considered nothing more than a Bulgarian dialect, but a divergent drift had already begun during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century together with the raise of the feeling of a national identity. From the 1920s onwards this divergence became more and more conspicuous.

On the one hand standard Bulgarian was based upon the North-Eastern dialects and the new literary koine evolved sharply from the previous one. On the other hand Macedonian elaborated a literary koine based upon the dialect of

TABLE 1  
A SUMMARY OF LANGUAGE BIRTH IN EUROPE

DATE	NAME	STATE	AFFILIATION
1944	Macedonian	Yugoslavia	Slavonic
1948	Faroese	Denmark	Germanic
1992	Luxembourgish	Luxemburg	Germanic
1992	Sardinian	Italy	Romance
1992	Aranese	Spain	Romance
1992	Croatian	Croatia	Slavonic
1992	Serbian	Yugoslavia	Slavonic
1995	Bosnian	Bosnia	Slavonic
1995	Ruthenian	Slovakia	Slavonic

Prilep and Veles in the Inner Macedonia, corresponding to the South-Western Bulgarian dialects.

In 1944 Macedonia became a Republic of the Yugoslavian Federation and the central Government recognized to Macedonian the status of official language in order to discourage the claims of Bulgaria, which were based on language identity too.

Finally in the 1990s Macedonia became an independent state and nowadays nobody would seriously query the statement that Bulgarian and Macedonian are two different Slavonic languages<sup>2</sup>.

In the realm of the Germanic family two new languages have come into being during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Feroese and Luxemburgish.

Feroese, after developing a literary koine through the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and after centuries of bilingual dependency on Danish, obtained the status of official language of the Farøe Islands in 1948.

Luxemburg became an independent state in 1919, but the native language, a variety of Rhine-Frankish, was in competition with two powerful languages like German and French and at the beginning Luxemburgish had few chances in this trilingual communication. In the course of the century, however, Luxemburgish gained prestige and enlarged its communicative domain and from 1992 is the official language of Luxemburg beside French<sup>3</sup>.

After 1992 the European Union has recognized the status of official regional language to two new Romance languages, namely Sardinian and Aranese. In this case the final stage precedes the other previous stages in the historical development and the result is an inconsistent situation.

Sardinian has no standard variety for the good reason that it has not yet elaborated a literary koine and the future per-

spective is not encouraging, because the different municipalities are all proud and jealous of their own vernaculars. In short, an official status has been recognized to a language that actually does not exist.

The other case is paradoxical, because Aranese is an Occitanic vernacular spoken by about three thousand people in a little valley of the Pyrenees, which is casually inside the border of Catalonia, and therefore an official status has been recognized to a vernacular that is devoid of any prerequisite of a language, as we stated above.

Another Romance language was artificially created in the former Soviet Union for the former Soviet Moldavian Republic by introducing the denomination of Moldavian instead of Rumanian. In 1991 the Rumanian Academy of Sciences abolished the denomination of Moldavian, that is still retained by the new-born Republic of Moldova as a cautionary measure against the claims of the Rumanian Government. Rather than a sociolinguistic case, this is a pure nominal question<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Development of New Slavonic Languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Among the Slavonic languages there are some interesting novelties to notice. Surely the less known case is that of Ruthenian. A little group of Western Ukrainian dialects was segregated from the Ukrainian domain and isolated in Eastern Slovakia. The speakers have retained their mother tongue together with the traditions of the Orthodox Church and feel themselves different both from Slovaks and from Ukrainians. In 1995 the Government of the Slovak Republic recognized to Ruthenian the status of minority language and the right to be taught in the primary school. The time to come will decide whether it is a bluff or the beginning of a new Slavonic language.

Let us finally face the question of the languages of the former Yugoslavia. During the 1990s Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian became the official languages of three independent states. So they are endowed of the two main prerequisites (national consciousness and official status), that are necessary to be considered languages. However there is a sharp contradiction with the other properties. Standard Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian are close varieties in geographical continuity, although during the last decades the linguists coming from this area have been making all the possible efforts to demonstrate the deep differences between them.

While the denomination of Bosnian was used for the first time by the Government of the Austrian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to discourage the claims of Serbia, the separation of Croatian and Serbian has ancient roots. Either had independent beginnings of the literary records, which trace back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, and independent historical developments until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when their separate traditions began to converge thanks to the growth of the Slavonic national consciousness and the struggle for independence. In the same period a common literary koine was elaborated on the

basis of the Štokavian variety of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

After the establishment of Yugoslavia and especially after the World War II, the Government made all possible effort in order to cushion the ethnic contrasts inside the country and the koine shared by the members of the Federal Republic took the neutral name of »Neoštokavian« with the resolution of Novi Sad in 1954<sup>2</sup>.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Croatian and Serbian find themselves again at the starting point, so that they may be defined »born again« rather than new-born languages. For the moment the situation is quite inconsistent, but we can foresee that in the long run the political partition will produce three different koinés by boosting the differences that surface at present. Anyway only the future history will show us if Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian will undergo the same drift as Macedonian and Bulgarian. Surely and regrettably we will not have the possibility of verifying our prediction.

My conclusion is that in Europe there are conditions favorable to the development of new languages according to a trend, which is in contrast with the general tendency of the languages of the world. I think that this is a good matter of speculation.

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## **RAĐENJE NOVIH JEZIKA U SUVREMENOJ EUROPI**

### **S A Ž E T A K**

Rađenje jezika povijesni je proces čiji se razvoj odvija u šest faza koje odgovaraju glavnim obilježjima (genetska udaljenost, geografska izoliranost, opismenjavanje, stvaranje književnog jezika, nacionalna svijest, službeni status) svojstvenima zapadnoj civilizaciji i ograničenima na naše područje interesa, odnosno na jezike u suvremenoj Europi. Dva posljednja obilježja najvažnija su i presudna u postizanju punog jezičnog statusa naspram narječja, dijalekta, idioma, pučkog govora i sličnog. Prema tome, u ovakvom se viđenju stvari rođenje jezika može utvrditi tek kada se njegova uporaba osjeća kao obilježje nacionalnog identiteta i kada je njegov službeni status politički priznat. Povijest nekih zanimljivih slučajeva 20. stoljeća, kao što su luksemburški, ferski i makedonski osvjetljavaju mogući budući scenarij za položaj jezika bivše Jugoslavije. O drugim problematičnim, iako daleko manje dramatičnim, slučajevima poput sardskog, aranskog, moldavskog i rusinskog raspravlja se u okviru problematike manjinskih jezika. Zaključno se može reći da će, za razliku od općih kretanja u svijetu, broj jezika u Europskoj Uniji tijekom 21. stoljeća vjerojatno porasti.